



ECOFEMINISM IN MYTHIC FICTION: ENVISAGING SITA AS NATURE'S CHILD IN THE FOREST OF ENCHANTMENTS

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ABSTRACT

One of the timeless epics of India, the Ramayan is reinterpreted by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni through her novel *The Forest of Enchantments*. She sticks to the original story, does not fictionalize Valmiki's legend, and exhibits Sita's nature-loving side. Chitra Banerjee makes the text more accessible and relatable to modern readers by humanizing the character of Sita which was otherwise deified in the canonical versions to suit the patriarchal standards of piety. The paper tries to understand how Sita fits into a modern avatar of a feminist, particularly an ecofeminist. In the paper, Sita is studied under the lens of ecofeminism to prove that the ancient goddess was nature's child at heart. No society can progress where neither Stri nor Prakriti is given their due respect. Women must realize that their subjugation at the hands of patriarchy is in proximity to the exploitation of nature. So, only she can raise a voice against such exploitative patriarchal ideas to release herself and mother earth. Women are the true protectors and saviours of ecology. Hence, we see Sita as an ecofeminist who is out there to protect, conserve and guard nature.

KEYWORDS: Ecofeminism, Sita, Nature's child, Patriarchy, Indian mythic fiction.

Silhouette of Ecofeminism in Modern Mythic Fiction: Envisioning an Ecofeminist Sita in *The Forest of Enchantments*

INTRODUCTION

"Ecofeminism is a branch of feminism that sees environmentalism, and the relationship between women and the earth, as foundational to its analysis and practice. Ecofeminist thinkers draw on the concept of gender to analyse the relationships between humans and the natural world" (MacGregor, 2006: 286). Ecofeminists analyse the connection between women and nature in culture, religion, and literature. In 1974, French feminist Francoise d' Eaubonne minted the term 'ecoféminisme' when she called upon women to lead an ecological revolution to save the planet. The concept was further developed by Ynestra King in 1976. Ecofeminism is also a social awakening of women to sustain a war against a patriarchal society that is causing harm to the environment. They call for the theory of green politics where one group has no domination over the other. Hence, ecofeminists' main aim is to save women and the earth because the two are interdependent. Some recent works of Susan Griffin, Ynestra King, Ariel Kay Salleh, and Karen Warren depict ecology as a feminist issue. Karen Warren considers patriarchy as an oppressive conceptual framework that divides society into powerful and weak. "For Warren, liberation from patriarchy consists in criticizing the patriarchal prejudices that lead to the "logic of dominance", to create an escape from those prejudices, we need an ethics based on "care". Between the patriarchal prejudices stands out the overestimation of the unilateral reason, non-contradictory and dualistic and the devaluation of the emotional scope, empathic, that establishes sensitive ties with the real and in the other hand the false idea that accomplishment is only possible in conquering (in possessing -we can say)" (Sagols, 2015: 7-8).

In the Indian context, Medha Patkar, Mahasweta Devi, Arundhati Roy, and Vandana Shiva are a few ecofeminists actively involved in the social sphere. Ecofeminism stands tall with the contribution of Vandana Shiva as its visible advocate. According to Shiva, Ecofeminism is a new terminology for ancient wisdom. She is a critique of modern science, technology, patriarchy, and colonialism which perpetuates violence against women and nature. So, this leads to the marginalization of women and nature and devalues both of them.

In "Ecofeminism at the Crossroads in India: A Review" Manisha Rao says, "For ecofeminists, therefore, the domination of women and nature is basically rooted in ideology. In order to overcome this, one needs to reconstruct and reconceptualize the underlying patriarchal values and structural relations of one's culture and promote equality, non-violence, non-hierarchical forms of organization to bring about new social forms. According to the ecofeminists, one also needs to realize the inter-connectedness of all life processes and hence revere nature and all life forms" (Rao, 2012:126). So, the domination of women is deeply rooted in society, and the patriarchy must be educated to promote reverence for both nature and women because a woman is a mirror image of nature.

In ancient Indian society, the Vedas paid equal importance to all organisms. Nature and literature have always been in proximity to one another and Indian ecofeminism derives its support from it. The woman-nature unison dates back to ancient Hindu philosophy, in which Prakriti and Purusha form the basis of existence.

Prakriti is enumerated with mother earth which is a source of creation, nurture, fertility, and motherhood. Hence, in Hindu mythology, women characters have been homogenized as one with nature. However, later, India with its mechanization or with the advent of capitalism removed women from their active role as agriculturists. Women did not have land or property rights. So, this new facet of capitalism in a way removed women to the periphery of society and thus marginalized them. In *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Survival in India* "...the death of prakriti is simultaneously a beginning of their marginalization, devaluation, displacement, and ultimate dispensability" (Shiva, 1988:40). So, if we study the ancient texts in the modern light of ecofeminism, we realize that both women and nature have been at the receiving ends. Women and nature remain his property and if they fall into the hands of another, they become polluted and impure. So, patriarchy exploits women as capitalism exploits nature.

Ecofeminist Sita

The Forest of Enchantments by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni throws light on the nature-woman partnership. According to Chitra Banerjee, women are the true protectors and saviours of ecology and so we see Sita as an ecofeminist who is out there to protect, conserve and guard nature. The character of Sita stands out as a nature's child who is born from the earth and evanesces into the earth. Sita, the name itself means 'furrow' in Sanskrit or a Hindu goddess of harvest in Rigveda. The name signifies fertility, earth, and motherhood. Sita as a nature lover never filled her basket with flowers to offer to God. She considered it murder. Her healing touch would bloom even the wilting flowers in her palm. She's the goddess earth, the earth child born to bless everyone. Here, Sita is close to nature both in deeds and needs. In the novel, as a nine-year-old female, Sita seems to be in love with solitude which one finds only in the companionship of nature. She is tender-hearted enough to feel the pain of the plants around her. Chitra Banerjee significantly accentuates the point that in the absence of Sita, her flowers and herbs shrivel and turn black on a balcony in Ayodhya. Fourteen years of exile for Ram and Sita brought them near nature. This is where we find an ecofeminist Sita, out there to conserve and preserve nature around her. The pains of leaving Ayodhya find no mention as she seems to be happily enveloped in the wilderness around her as displayed through the following lines:

Here in Panchbati I saw brilliant sunsets spreading like a smile across the sky and molten-silver moon rises. I saw stars glimmering like shy eyes from behind veils of cloud. I saw birds and beasts, multi-hued, multi pelted, so different from the creatures I had known that I was struck with awe. (Divakaruni 2019:137)

In Panchbati, she plants her vegetable garden which flourished due to her magic touch. Here we see how nature also is responding to the love of Sita and is foretelling that her biological clock is ticking away as well. Her seeds of fertility seem to be quickly degenerating as represented by the decaying ripped plants. Hence, for Sita nature is a part of her subconscious mind which constantly reminds her of her body's needs. Nature is a part of women's nurture, existence, and subconscious mind, and this is elaborated as, "Women's monthly fertility cycle, the tiring symbiosis of pregnancy, the wrench of child birth and the pleasure of suckling an infant, these things already ground women's consciousness in the knowledge of being coterminous with nature. However tacit or unconscious

this identity may be for many women ... it is nevertheless "fact of life" (Salleh, 1984: 340).

So, Sita feels lonely at Panchbati and longs for a child to consummate her womanhood and is therefore enchanted by the deer that grew like an addiction. This is indicative of her unfulfilled desires. Later in the forest, Sita aches with loneliness, her heart longs to hold something in her empty arms and cuddle it. This indeed was her hunger for a baby, a hunger to become a mother. In the forest of Panchbati, maternal instinct emanates from Sita because her body seems to be in harmony with nature. Her strange desire to hold the golden deer grew like an addiction and she craved more and more for it but Ram remains oblivious to her emotional and physical wants. The nature around Ram could not persuade him about taking care of the longings of his wife. Ram, a phlegmatic man, remains uncomfortable about the idea of catching the deer. The golden deer becomes a craving for Sita who marvels at its natural beauty but on the other hand, Ram fails to treasure its natural charm. So, Sita makes a self-connect through nature's deer but Ram remains in limbo, failing to awaken his consciousness even in the lap of nature. This highlights the fact that a man has always remained impervious to nature and fails to discover his true identity. Also, Ram remains unmindful of the longings of Sita. Her longing to have a child is turned down by Ram who fails to understand her because "his body wasn't made to harbor another life" (Divakaruni, 2019:141). The apathy of Ram towards the corporeal appetite of Sita is equated to the impassivity with which nature is dealt by him. Ram is not comfortable with the act of procreation in the forest so he advises Sita to be patient till the banishment days get over. On the other hand, it is Sita who realizes that her true purpose in life, while being one with nature, is to procreate and sustain like Prakriti. Ram's temperament is not in harmony with the emotional impetus that Sita experiences in the woods. Ram, the dweller of the city of Ayodhya, is remote from the emotional milieu of the forest that Sita lives in.

Ecofeminism believes that patriarchal society tends to equate women and nature to one another because they share the same properties of caregiving, love, endurance, and nurturing. But the exploitation of both of them at the hands of men is what conjoins them to the same fate of marginalization. Here, we have an ecofeminist Sita who rejoices in her proximity to nature but also realizes how women and nature are exploited by men for their avidity. In *The Forest of Enchantments*, we find that Ram and Lakshman intrude into the forest intending to acquire it for their profit. Unlike Sita, who finds the forest as her home, they want to control the woods to enter into the habitats to clear space for living, cultivation, or hunting. In the novel, we have an instance where Sage Gautam welcomes both Ram and Lakshman into the forest "To get rid of them for good. To wipe out their unholy ways. To spread the light of civilization" (135). These words are a clear indication that the patriarchy wants to subdue 'them', the native forest dwellers, for personal profits.

Lakshman too "did not approve of Sita's friendship with the forest creatures" (Divakaruni, 2019:138) terming this affinity as dangerous. He is uneasy in the ambience of natural settings because it is believed that he could not sleep during his entire stay of fourteen years in the jungles. This reflects how men have a strong disliking for something which is in an organic state, be it a woman or nature. Men want to either monopolize or exploit but don't want any unison with nature and its habitats. Lakshman rejects Sita's friendship with nature. Unlike the calming effect of nature on Sita, we find that the patriarchs remain troubled in such an ambience. The mocking of Surpanakha at the hands of Ram and Lakshman is another instance in the novel which depicts how the native rakshasi was denigrated for her untamed disposition. Later on, the mutilation of Surpanakha indeed is a misogynist act in nature. She was hated by the patriarchy for being an uncultivated beauty and castigated for her innocent overtures. It seems that both Ram and Lakshman had a superiority complex that was deeply ingrained in them. On the other hand, Sita sympathizes and empathizes with Surpanakha because she believed that the forest belonged to her while they were mere visitors to the forest. They had no right to unsettle the chastity of the forest by defacing naive Surpanakha. Indeed, Sita stands out as a champion of women's rights who dislikes the whimsical superior notions of the two patriarchs. Sita worships the sanctity of nature and its elements, therefore stands out as a true upholder of Ecofeminism.

After the abduction of Sita, Ravan, an asur, seems docile and polite to Sita and never a tyrant. Sita develops a strange sympathy for him and was "unable to hate him", though the asurs have been termed by humans as barbaric and uncivilized. The proximity of the asur, Ravan, with nature was a yoking thread between Sita and him. "Somehow Ravan had learned that I love plants, and he filled the spaces around my Ashoka tree with an embarrassing abundance of exotic and fragrant varieties" (Divakaruni, 2019:196). On the other hand, Ram juxtaposed his wife and her chastity as an ideal for dharma and is willing to accept her only after the Agni pariksha. For him, the purity of a woman is as important as uncontaminated nature.

Once back in Ayodhya, Sita missed the freedom of forest life and took special care of plants and trees around her so that they could bloom again and produce fruits. Yet, a strange distraction would come over Sita as she longed to walk in the real forest. Further, we find that Sita delivers her twins in the Valmiki ashram amidst the bountiful nature where everyone accepts and trusts her. In troublesome times, Sita seeks help from mother earth and wishes for the safety of her

children. She believes that in the lap of nature her children's strengths will be unique. Just like Sita, the children amassed the healing touch of their mother because they too were cultured in the aura of pure nature. Sita, resting her ardent faith in nature, endures the pains inflicted by the man of her life. This is a reminder that even mother nature is continuously subjected to exploitation at the hands of men just like Sita.

At last, Sita is made to undertake the Agni pariksha to prove her chastity and devotion to Ram when he encounters her at Valmiki's ashram during Ashwamedha Yagya. But this time she rejects to prove her innocence again and stands up to say no more. She acknowledges that she has suffered enough and has been wrongly accused of no fault of hers. So, Sita is taken back by mother earth when the earth cracks open to absorb her child.

CONCLUSION

In India, where we equate goddesses with nature, it becomes pertinent to protect nature as well. No society can progress where neither Stri nor Prakriti is given their due respect. Women must realize that their subjugation at the hands of patriarchy is in proximity to the exploitation of nature. Only she can raise a voice against such exploitative patriarchal ideas to release herself and mother earth. In this context, contemporary mythic fiction has redefined ancient myths to suit the interests of modern readers. So, the novel under study highlights the hidden facets of Sita as a nature's child, studies her character through the lens of ecofeminism, and delivers an age-old story in a new version through the medium of Indian mythic fiction.

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